

Editorial: Community Corrections

Submitted by Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer

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Contact: Sarah Elliott (406) 444-9725

Somebody had to say enough is enough.

Montana had the nation's sixth highest growth in prison population in both 2003 and 2004. According to the U.S. Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics, the average annual growth in Montana's prison population in 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2004 was 5.5 percent. That was nearly three times the national average during that period (1.9 percent). Previously the solution was to pour more concrete and buy more barbed wire. I knew there had to be a better way. A way that saves taxpayers money and helps those felons who can be rehabilitated get back on their feet, while still keeping the hard criminals behind bars.

So when I took office in 2005, I invested in community corrections. We have created 172 more prerelease beds in the past three fiscal years, 120 meth treatment beds were added in 2007, a 40-bed DUI treatment center opened in Glendive in 2005, and 155-bed facility opened for women in Billings, featuring a prerelease center, chemical dependency treatment program, and an assessment and sanction center.

Now the report card is in. Late last week, Montana received some very positive news. A study from The Pew Charitable Trusts showed Montana leading all 50 states in the decrease of the number of incarcerated people last year. The nation's overall prison population grew by 1.6 percent in 2007, while Montana's number fell 3.9 percent. Montanans can be proud of our efforts to protect public safety, hold people accountable and help folks deal with addiction problems, mental illness or whatever is at the root of their criminal behavior. Montana's achievement is the result of an innovative plan to increase alternatives to prison.

We have nearly 9,000 offenders on probation and parole and, every day, they continue their efforts to remain law-abiding and productive citizens. Supervising an offender on probation or parole costs about \$4 per day, compared with as much as \$80 a day to keep an inmate in prison.

A recent University of Montana study showed that among the offender population in Montana, 46 percent have a mental illness and a staggering 93 percent have a substance abuse problem or a chemical dependency. The goal of many of the new programs is to provide the kind of individualized treatment that will work at reducing the number of repeat offenders. In 2006, Montana had 3,572 people behind bars. At the beginning of 2008, that number had gone down to 3,431. My goal and the goal of the Department of Corrections is to reserve prison cells for 20 percent of our most dangerous felons and manage the remaining 80 percent in some kind of community program.

Underlying all this is the need to maintain public safety and offender accountability. Community corrections is allowing us to do just that and save the Montana taxpayers money. Montana can be proud of our efforts to create a corrections system that is smart, efficient and effective in protecting public safety, ensuring offenders are accountable for their crimes and help them overcome addictions, mental health problems and lives dominated by crime.

Enough was enough.